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COURSES FOR BEGINNERS IN SCHOOLS AND COLLEGES¹

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THE best method of teaching a modern foreign language to beginners is a subject that lends itself to controversy and it is one that I approach with considerable diffidence. There are probably no two people who agree as to how beginners should be taught, and my preference must be considered merely that of one among a host of teachers. I shall, however, treat this subject as impersonally as is possible.

With our present educational system, beginners should be classified, it seems to me, in three separate groups: firstly, those who begin the study of a foreign language in the primary school; secondly, those who begin in the secondary school; and thirdly, those who begin in college. In the primary schools there should be a minimum of formal grammar, and a maximum of oral work such as conversation and story telling. Easy stories should be read and discussed, and the students should tell the stories over and over again, both orally and in writing, until they almost know them by heart. There should be very little translation from one language into the other. At first it may be necessary to give the English equivalents of words or sentences, but formal translation of texts should be avoided. The work is made more interesting and surely more effective by the introduction of action series and of games and songs. Fortunate are the young people who have a few years of such training with teachers who speak the language well; but today, for the most part, this early training is to be had chiefly in private schools.

When we consider the secondary schools we find the problem quite different. The students are more mature, and their work is

¹A paper read at the meeting of the Association of Modern Language Teachers of The Central West and South at Chicago, May 7, 1921.

presumably more arduous. The average age of the high school matriculant is about fourteen years. Most high school students study a modern foreign language only two years, although a considerable minority take such work for three or four years. Those students who begin the study of a modern foreign language during their first year in the high school are younger and to a large degree less mature than are those who make their start during the third year, and again the problem of the two classes of students is somewhat different.

It is my conviction that the younger and the less mature the student is, the more time should be given to oral drill and the less time to translation and the study of formal grammar. But when a boy or girl has reached the age of fifteen or sixteen years and has already spent nine or ten years in school, it is certainly a mistake to expect him or her to learn a new language by the same mental processes that a child in the primary school must use of necessity.

A child ten years of age can best learn the uses of the tenses of verbs merely by using them again and again in sentences, until the more common constructions become a part of his mental equipment almost without conscious effort. But the older student has a natural tendency to classify facts and reduce them to rules. This tendency should be encouraged. A worthwhile student fifteen or sixteen years of age has developed intellectual curiosity, and his mind is not satisfied if he can not explain natural phenomena. Encourage him by all means to fix in his memory the conjugations of verbs and the rules for the inflection of nouns and adjectives, and then have him use these facts over and over again until they become second nature. Do not hesitate to help the more mature student to avail himself of every possible short-cut to a knowledge of the foreign language.

In my opinion it is also of vital importance that all high school students should be required to practice translating the foreign language into English as well as English into the foreign language. This exercise often makes our students conscious, for the first time, of the structure of their native language, and this is no mean advantage. It is, in fact, one valid reason for the study of a foreign language in the public schools, which we can present to the general public. Moreover, the ability to make an accurate translation of one language into another is a most useful possession, and one that

can be had only by practice and long continued effort. I have even known young people who possessed two languages about equally well, but who were quite unable to translate accurately a letter from one language into the other. Such persons would not make satisfactory correspondents in a business house that has dealings with foreign countries. Moreover, our students of foreign languages should consider it one of their duties to interpret to our American public the thought of other peoples, and the interpretation should be correct and accurate.

Let me make clear that I do not advocate the study of a modern foreign language merely by the old-fashioned "grammar and translation" method, now so much in discredit, but I do urge that all high school students have a reasonable amount of study of formal grammar and of practice in translation. Let us not go to the other extreme and throw overboard all such aids to the thorough acquisition of a foreign language.

The most important factor in the successful teaching of a language is, of course, the competent, well-trained and skilful teacher. These we must have, or else the study of all foreign languages will fall into disrepute. And our teachers must not hesitate to require good hard work and to eliminate those who will not work. Only rarely can wealth be acquired without hard work, much of which is mere drudgery. Knowledge is even a sterner task-master than wealth, for knowledge can never be acquired without hard work. We may seek every possible means to make study pleasant and interesting, but let us never try to make it too easy. Rather let our motto be thoroughness. If one may generalize, it is safe to say that our American people need nothing more than respect for thoroughness. Of course, young people are rarely thorough, and it is exceedingly difficult to make them so; but let us do what we can to make our students acquire the habit of doing their work thoroughly. If we do this, the nation will in time give us our due reward.

Our young people should be taught even to do hard, thorough work when they are not under our vigilant eye. Once I visited a first-year French class in a large city high school. The lesson was in the irregular verbs. The teacher was sweating blood in an effort to hammer the verbs into the students, no one of whom gave evidence of having done any work at all in preparation of the

lesson. I confess that I boiled with indignation. Why should those students not have been required to go off by themselves and learn those verbs? The teacher's function was to explain difficulties and to see that the work was done well, but why should she do all the work? For her to do so was unfair to herself and unfair to the students in the class.

There is no question that language clubs and the occasional performance of a play in the foreign language help to arouse interest and are a practical aid to the acquirement of an active vocabulary. They serve to make a language appear alive and not a mere abstraction.

The benefits derived from the acquisition of a foreign language should be both utilitarian and cultural. It would be a great pity if the high schools should make their language work entirely utilitarian. If the beauty of a language and the sublime thoughts of its prophets were withheld from our students, the result would be comparable to a building constructed so as to keep out the wind and the rain but without the slightest regard to graceful lines and harmonious colors. By all means, let us at least attempt to convince our students that the knowledge of a foreign language is a key that will open the door to a storehouse of golden treasures in verse and prose.

College students are older and more mature than those in the high schools and they should, therefore, begin the study of a new language in quite a different way. It is their privilege and their duty to make use of every mental short-cut and to master the elements of the language as quickly as possible. They should commit to memory lists of new words, the conjugations of verbs, and the commoner rules of accidence and syntax. This memory work should be accompanied by much reading and by varied exercises. It is absurd to ask college students to learn a new language by a "natural method" or by an extreme "direct method." They are too old and they have not the time.

It is a well known fact that some universities—notably Columbia and Chicago—no longer give elementary courses in foreign languages, while some others offer the work, but do not give full credit. President Nicholas Murray Butler has said that in his opinion it is as absurd to give elementary language courses in a university as it would be to give courses in elementary arith-

metic. There is no blinking the fact that beginners' courses in foreign languages have fallen into discredit in college circles. Is this not at least partly due to the method by which languages are taught in many colleges? Students spend hours and hours of their time in the class-room repeating over and over again the most elementary phrases so as to fix them in their memory by a "natural process," and they do very little serious study outside of the class-room. Now, this is not intellectual work of a high order such as college students should be expected to do, and I am convinced that the elementary nature, the almost childish methods, of much of the teaching of foreign languages in our colleges is largely responsible for the opinion—which seems to be growing—that beginners' courses have no place in a university.

For my part, I see no valid reason for not giving beginners' courses to underclassmen in college provided the work be brought up to college standards. There is today a tendency in the West to divide the College of Liberal Arts into two separate parts: the Junior College and the Senior College, or the Lower Division and the Upper Division. Several universities (California, Chicago, Minnesota, Nebraska, Stanford, Toledo, Washington) have already made the separation and others are preparing to do so. These universities are also organizing separate junior colleges in their respective states and are urging high school graduates to take the first two years of college work in a junior college before coming on to the university. There are at the present time about one hundred and twenty-five junior colleges, nearly all of which are in the South and West.

There is a growing feeling that the real line of demarcation between secondary school work and university work comes at the end of the sophomore year in college. If this be true, there is certainly no good reason why freshmen and sophomores should not have the opportunity of acquiring a new language, providing they are willing to do good stiff work. The case of juniors and seniors is different. If an upperclassman finds that he must learn a new language in order to do satisfactorily some work he has at hand, he should have the opportunity of learning it, but he should not receive college credit for this work.

For most students who begin the study of a new foreign language after they enter college, the chief value comes from the ability to

read articles and books on science, medicine, law, history, and so forth, and also to read prose fiction and verse.

In order to make beginners' courses in college really worth while, we must not hesitate to require the study of formal grammar and translation from one language into the other. There should be much written work and much reading of texts. The reading should begin early and the amount read in a given time should increase steadily. In the second semester—and still more so in the second year—this problem invariably presents itself: how can we read daily from ten to twenty-five pages and do the work thoroughly? I see only two solutions, neither one of which is perfect. We can ask the students to prepare a few pages intensively and do the rest rapidly. Or we can assign only a few pages for a lesson and require of the students much outside reading. The two methods are equally effective, if there be frequent written tests. Not all of the pages that are prepared intensively should be translated, but there should be some translation daily during the first two years in college. Most of the text, however, should be treated differently. There should be a discussion of idioms and difficult syntactical expressions, and this discussion should be carried on in the foreign language so far as is possible.

Even among students who wait until they go to college before beginning the study of a foreign language there are some who wish to learn to speak the language well and are willing to make the necessary effort. I might say parenthetically that there are many who would like to speak the language but who are *not* willing to make the necessary effort: this type of undergraduate I do not consider in the following remarks.

Those who wish to learn to speak should be segregated from the others at the earliest possible moment. They should be in small classes and should have the best teachers. They should have additional work in oral and written composition, and they should have training in phonetics. In return for these special privileges they should be expected to do superior work.

It is my sincere belief that all beginners' courses in foreign languages can be made worth while, whether they be given in the elementary school, in the high school, or in the first two years of college, but one and the same method can not be used for the

three groups. The younger the student, the more he can absorb without conscious effort. The older he is, the more he can and must acquire by conscious intellectual effort. By all means, let us not make the mistake of advocating one method for all, both young and old. And in all our courses in foreign languages let us insist on thorough work. After all there is a real pleasure—and a pleasure of high order—that comes from feeling that work is well done.

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